

# TheNational

## Sound and vision

Youssef Rakha

Last Updated: May 08, 2008 7:38PM UAE / GMT

Time stopped at Cassells hotel in Abu Dhabi on Friday. It was a fleeting impression, but haunting. The photographer had positioned the three musicians in dramatic formation on the stairs to shoot them with their instruments: Tarek Banzi hugging an Iraqi-made oud; Julia Banzi flaunting a stately flamenco guitar; and Charlie Bisharat balancing the smallest instrument yet, a violin, on his shoulder.

Thus arrayed while the camera click-clicked, occasionally pitting its flash against the sunlit window to one side, the three musicians started, reflexively, indolently, to play. It happened without so much as a nod to each other, evidently without thinking: the auditory equivalent of doodling, but with three distinct hands on the same scrap of paper. And while it lasted, in a very real way, time stopped.

Time was to stop for much longer the following night at the Cultural Foundation's Dhafra Theatre. The trio presented what Julia called "a half programme". Their concerts are always part heritage, part original composition, she explained, and their repertoire is likewise "50-50". Saturday evening's eight pieces included traditional Andalusí and flamenco numbers from Tétouan and Granada, respectively, as well as new compositions and improvisations. Given the lack of publicity and the last-minute confusion as to which troupe was to perform at what time, the auditorium was impressively full.

People were pleasantly jolted by the sound of Arab and European traditions being woven together, seamlessly, right there before their eyes. And it was as if the clash of civilisations had been resolved more than 1,000 years ago. You felt like saying, "Take that, Samuel Huntington!"

Time stopped, you realise now, because different styles working so beautifully together have a disorienting effect. You could hardly associate the almost physical excitement of flamenco with the rhythmic melancholy of the oud. Nor, in the middle of attempting to tell the two apart, would you expect to hear the flowing, nostalgic sound of a kamanjah, the Arabic word for fiddle tuned, like European strings, to omit quarter tones. "What we're doing," Julia had announced on the phone, "connects well with people. It's fresh, it's exciting. Young people really connect with it. Young people from all over the world."

But even Julia's words could not prefigure the experience of contemporary Andalusí – the term the Banzis coined to brand the music of their Al Andalus Ensemble, founded in 1987 – which, even for a few impromptu moments on a hotel stairway in Abu Dhabi, proves deeply unsettling.

On that same day, in the kind of gangsta voice that Arabs who immigrate to America tend to acquire, Tarek explained that he played many instruments. Tétouan, where he grew up, is "the most authentic" centre for Andalusí, the quarter tone-less (hence harmonic) Arab musical tradition which originated in Al Andalus. He grew up immersed in Andalusí and, thanks to his mother being a Darqawí dervish, in the percussive chanting of the Sufis as well. But he never let any of it tie him down. "I just, you know, have to feel it."

At the concert Tarek would demonstrate just how freely he relates to music and how versatile his technical skill is with ney and darbuka (tabla) solos: the reed flute and the hand-tapped drum, which he played, anachronistically, like a banjo. "Actually the oud I didn't really study seriously," he explained, "because I was into western music... Rock, pop – all kinds. Since I was a kid," he revealed, "I started making my own instruments." As a fine-arts student, painter and amateur flamenco and jazz musician – today Tarek is also a professional graphic designer – he spent 10 years in Madrid after finishing his education at the Tétouan Fine Arts School, practically the only institution of its kind in Morocco in the early 1970s. By the mid-1980s he had met Julia, one of a handful of female flamenco guitarists worldwide, and they now live in Portland, Oregon.

Like Gibraltar, Tarek is named after the Berber hero Tarek ibn Ziyad, who, servicing the Ummayyid government in exile, led the first Muslim army into Spain. The Banzis – a well established Spanish Arab family from Granada – fled the Reconquest back into Morocco. Yet Tarek is adamantly against exclusive cultural allegiances. "I think that I belong to this little globe where we are," he said, his tone bordering on exasperation. "And there are these huge monotheistic religions and you have to respect all of them because there are so many people in each. You have to respect these people."

At this point the default De Niro cool comes back, "so the only way we can do something is to try and create this peace between



Oud for thought: Moroccan Tariq Banzi travelled from America to play at the Cultural Foundation. [Nicole Hill / The National](#)

them”. “Music,” he enunciated, “I think it does create understanding.”

The most convincing part of which argument is, of course, the music itself. Contemporary Andalusian works by disrupting expectations, forcing people to realise that legacies overlap. By fusing Andalusi with flamenco (through which the Banzis have pursued the Roma and Indian connections as well), by resuscitating the Judaeo-Spanish (Ladino) tradition – the music played wherever communities of Sephardim survived the Inquisition from the 15th century onwards – as well as the Cantigas of Santa Maria, their music points up what is shared. Where bridges of understanding are concerned, it excavates instead of constructing. “You might guess that it’s not an easy time to be an Arab in America,” Julia said on the phone. “So that’s part of what we’re trying to do in the group: to break down Arab prejudices in America, and hopefully break down American prejudices in the Arab world.”

Charlie Bisharat, a Grammy award winning violinist whose credits include accompanying Yanni, Elton John and The Rolling Stones, agrees: “If we concentrated more on bringing music to different parts of the world from different cultures we wouldn’t have so much time to think about killing each other.” For Charlie, playing with the Banzis was “a kind of reunion,” but being half-Lebanese – a different kind of Arab American from Tarek – he fully appreciates Al Andalus’s message. Contemporary Andalusian is certainly different but, he said, “I love that stuff.”

The uninitiated might identify it as Arab, Latin or chamber music. Taste and predisposition, or else – to borrow the title of the group’s latest CD – Genetic Memories, will determine which. To the uninitiated, it may seem miraculous that no jarring or discomfort occurs. But the miracle – the Ornament of the World, as Maria Rosa Menocal called it – is medieval Spain, Al Andalus, which from 711 to 1492 pooled Arab, Berber, Sephardi and Castilian genes to constitute an early, long lived and in some sense exemplary multicultural society.

Back in the Arabian Peninsula, between Damascus and Baghdad, the Abbassids had massacred the first Muslim dynasty down to the last man – almost. Thanks to a single escaped emir, Abdurrahman, who managed to establish a power base not far from where Tarek was born, the first continuous eight centuries of all but perfect intermingling of East and West in human history occurred in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. But unlike the meeting of East and West in Malta, for example, language did not mix so well; it takes a linguist to point out the extent of Arabic influence on Spanish. With music it simply takes a receptive pair of ears. And that is why the experience of the music of Al Andalus is a bit like a monolingual Arab or his Italian counterpart hearing Maltese for the first time: it sounds simultaneously foreign and familiar, suggesting something beyond him, and yet he can understand it almost perfectly.

[yakha@thenational.ae](mailto:yakha@thenational.ae)

---